

Message Text

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SUBJ: PRESS AND OFFICIAL REACTION TO SRI LANKAN
ELECTIONS

REFS: (NOTAL) A. BOMBAY 1773, B. CALCUTTA 1796,
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SUMMARY. THE OVERWHELMING VICTORY OF THE
UNITED NATIONAL PARTY (UNP) RECEIVED PROMINENT COVERAGE
IN THE INDIAN PRESS. REACTION IN THE NATIONAL DAILIES
WAS FAIRLY UNIFORM. FEW EDITORIALS SAW ANY IMPLICATIONS
IN THE RESULTS FOR BILATERAL RELATIONS; MOST TREATED
CAUTIOUSLY THE QUESTION OF THE GOOD SHOWING OF THE TAMIL
UNITED LIBERATION FRON (TULF) AND CONCENTRATED THEIR
COMMENTS UPON DRAWING PARALLELS BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENTS
OF MRS GANDHI AND MRS BANDARANAIKE AND THEIR RESPECTIVE
REPUDIATION AT THE POLLS. THE VERNACULAR PRESS GENERALLY
DEALT WITH THE SAME THEMES, WITH THOSE IN WESTERN INDIA
EXPRESSING OUTRIGHT HAPPINESS OVER THE DEFEAT OF MRS
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BANDARANAIKE AND THOSE IN THE SOUTH COMMENTING WITH
RESTRAINT UPON THE TAMIL ISSUE. IN HIS MESSAGE OF
CONGRATULATION TO JAYEWARDENE, PRIME MINISTER DESAI ALSO
TOOK UP THE PRESS THEMES OF THE PARALLEL BETWEEN THE
INDIAN AND SRI LANKAN ELECTIONS AND OF ANOTHER TRIUMPH
FOR DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIA. END SUMMARY.

1. THE OVERWHELMING VICTORY OF THE UNITED NATIONAL PARTY IN SRI LANKA RECEIVED PROMINENT COVERAGE IN THE INDIAN PRESS. MOST EDITORIALS NOTED THAT ALTHOUGH THE VICTORY WAS NOT UNEXPECTED GIVEN THE SRI LANKAN HABIT OF TURNING OUT INCUMBENT GOVERNMENTS, THE DIMENSIONS OF THE WIN WERE SURPRISING. EDITORIALS EMPHASIZED THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE REGIMES OF MRS GANDHI AND MRS BANDARANAIKE, IN PARTICULAR ARBITRARY RULE, NEPOTISM, AND RESTRICTIONS ON THE PRESS. THE OUTCOME WAS SEEN AS A NEGATIVE VOTE AGAINST THE SLFP BECAUSE OF MIS-MANAGEMENT OF THE ECONOMY, CORRUPTION, INFLATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT. ON A PLAINTIVE NOTE, THE PRO-CONGRESS "NATIONAL HERALD" PROTESTED THAT THE COMPARISON WITH INDIA SHOULD NOT BE CARRIED TOO FAR AND THAT NEITHER DEFEATED RULING PARTY COULD BE WRITTEN OFF ENTIRELY AND MAY RISE AGAIN AS IS COMMON OCCURRENCE IN "MATURE DEMOCRACIES" SUCH AS INDIA AND SRI LANKA.

2. EDITORIALS TOOK NOTE OF THE ROUT OF THE LEFTIST PARTIES, WITH SOME DRAWING COMPARISONS WITH THE CPI'S LOSSES IN INDIA FOR HAVING TOO LONG SUPPORTED AN UNPOPULAR REGIME AND OTHERS SEEING SUCH LOSSES AS ANOTHER SIGN OF A MOVE TO RIGHT-OF-CENTER IN THE SUB-CONTINENT. THE PRO-MOSCOW "PATRIOT" TOOK THE TACK OF ATTRIBUTING THE DEFEAT OF THE RULING PARTIES IN BOTH LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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COUNTRIES TO THEIR FAILURE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE POOR AND TO THEIR ABANDONMENT OF THE LEFT.

3. REGARDING J R JAYEWARDENE, MOST EDITORIALS NOTED HIS CONSERVATIVE, CAPITALIST IMAGE BUT ALSO COMMENTED UPON HIS EFFORTS TO MODERNIZE HIS PARTY'S IMAGE WITH A SOCIALIST DRESS. HE WAS GENERALLY VIEWED AS A COMPETENT, EXPERIENCED POLITICIAN, WITH SOME COMPARISONS MADE TO MORARJI DESAI BUT WITH JAYEWARDENE SEEN AS HAVING THE ADVANTAGE OF LEADING A UNITED, DISCIPLINED PARTY. ALL EDITORIALISTS AGREED THAT THE PRIORITY CONCERN FOR JAYEWARDENE WOULD BE THE ECONOMY. JAYEWARDENE'S REPORTED REMARK THAT HE WOULD TAKE LESS INTEREST IN NON-ALIGNMENT WAS VARIOUSLY INTERPRETED: THE INDEPENDENT "FREE PRESS JOURNAL" SAID IT INDICATED HIS CONSERVATISM; THE "PATRIOT" SUSPECTED JAYEWARDENE WOULD TURN TO THE WEST FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC GUIDANCE; THE INDEPENDENT "INDIAN EXPRESS" THOUGHT SUCH A VIEW WOULD MAKE SRI LANKA LESS POPULAR WITH THE THIRD WORLD; AND SEVERAL OTHER PAPERS THOUGHT THAT SRI LANKA IN ANY EVENT WOULD REMAIN NON-ALIGNED.

4. THE GOOD SHOWING OF THE TAMIL UNITED LIBERATION FRONT (TULF) WAS TREATED GINGERLY. MOST PAPERS SAID THAT THE NEW GOVERNMENT SHOULD REJECT THE SEPARATIST DEMANDS BUT SHOULD GIVE CAREFUL AND SYMPATHETIC ATTENTION TO THE UNDOUBTEDLY JUSTIFIED GRIEVANCES OF THE TAMIL MINORITY BECAUSE THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL UNITY WAS AT STAKE. THE INDEPENDENT "STATESMAN" CONSIDERED THAT THE UNP'S OVERWHELMING VICTORY WOULD REDUCE THE TAMIL'S BARGAINING POWER, AND THE "TIMES OF INDIA" SAID THE TAMILS MUST BE BROUGHT INTO THE MAINSTREAM OF SOCIETY.

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5. THE VERNACULAR PRESS REPEATED THE SAME THEMES, FREQUENTLY AT GREATER LENGTH AND IN PARTICULAR IN DRAWING COMPARISONS BETWEEN SANJAY GANDHI AND ANURA BANDARANAIKE. THE MARATHI AND GUJARATI PRESS IN WESTERN INDIA EXPRESSED IN NO UNCERTAIN TERMS HAPPINESS OVER THE DEFEAT OF MRS BANDARANAIKE'S GOVERNMENT. THE SOUTH INDIAN PRESS TREATMENT OF THE TULF HAS BEEN STRAIGHTFORWARD AND EDITORIAL COMMENT RELATIVELY RESTRAINED, WITH AN ALMOST COMPLETE ABSENCE OF PROVOCATIVE STATEMENTS.

6. IN THE ONLY OFFICIAL PUBLIC REACTION TO THE ELECTION RESULTS, THE GOI ALLUDED TO THE PARALLEL TO THE INDIAN ELECTIONS AND ECHOED THE PRESS THEME THAT THE SRI LANKAN OUTCOME WAS ANOTHER VINDICATION OF SOUTH

ASIAN DEMOCRACY. IN HIS MESSAGE OF CONGRATULATIONS TO JAYEWARDENE, PRIME MINISTER DESAI REPORTEDLY WROTE, "I RECALL THAT UPON MY ASSUMPTION OF OFFICE, YOU HAD DRAWN MANY SIMILARITIES BETWEEN OUR APPROACH (SIC). THE MANNER AND EXTENT OF YOUR VICTORY ALSO AFFORDS AN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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INTERESTING PARALLEL." DESAI FURTHER SAID THAT HE WISHED TO CONGRATULATE THE PEOPLE OF SRI LANKA FOR "THIS PEACEFUL TRANSITION OF POWER -- YET ANOTHER TRIUMPH OF DEMOCRACY IN OUR PART OF THE WORLD."

7. CONGEN MADRAS REPORTS THAT THE DMK AND DK (TWO OF THE TAMIL REGIONAL PARTIES), WHICH TRADITIONALLY HAVE BEEN SYMPATHETIC TO THE SRI LANKAN TAMILS' CAUSE, ARE SAID TO CONSIDER THE TULF VOTE A VINDICATION OF THE DEMAND FOR A SEPARATE TAMIL STATE, ALTHOUGH THIS VIEW APPARENTLY HAS NOT BEEN EXPRESSED PUBLICLY. TAMIL NADU CHIEF MINISTER AND AIADMK LEADER RAMACHANDRAN AND DMK LEADER KARUNANIDHI REPORTEDLY SENT CONGRATULATORY MESSAGES TO JAYEWARDENE, WITH KARUNANIDHI EXPRESSING THE HOPE THAT JAYEWARDENE WOULD SAFEGUARD TAMIL INTERESTS IN SRI LANKA. RAMACHANDRAN ALSO REPORTEDLY SENT A CONGRATULATORY MESSAGE TO TULF GENERAL SECRETARY AMRITHALINGAM. KARUNANIDHI AND THE GENERAL SECRETARY OF YET ANOTHER TAMIL FACTION, THE MDMK, ARE REPORTED ALSO TO HAVE ISSUED STATEMENTS CONGRATULATING TULF ON ITS SUCCESS.
GOHEEN

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